

Why Religious Experience Cannot Justify Religious Belief

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Abstract: *Theists often claim that neither the diversity of religious experience nor natural explanations for religious experience can threaten the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief. Contrarily, this paper argues that not only do they pose such a threat, but the diversity of religious experiences and natural explanations for them completely undermine their epistemic justificatory power. To establish this, the author first defines the supposed role of religious experience in justifying religious belief. Then the author shows how the diversity of religious experience raises an inductive problem that negates religious experience's ability to justify religious belief. The author then shows that available natural explanations for religious experience do the same by simply providing better explanations of religious experiences (i.e., explanations that are more adequate than religious explanations of those experiences).*

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“As [Paul] was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground ...” (Act 9:3–4, NASB)

In Chapter 9 of their 1999 book, *Phantoms in the Brain*, entitled “God and the Limbic System,” neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee told the story of a patient named Paul—a Goodwill store assistant manager who has been blessed—or haunted—by intense religious experiences all his life. Ironically, Paul’s experiences mirror, almost exactly, those of his biblical namesake: the Apostle Paul. “I remember seeing a bright light before I fell on the ground and wondering where it came from.”¹ Like the

¹ V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 180.

Apostle, Paul's experiences completely changed his life, and he goes on to write, at great length, about the profundities of religious truths—"an enormous manuscript ... [that] set out his views on philosophy, mysticism and religion; the nature of the trinity; the iconography of the star of David; elaborate drawings depicting spiritual themes, strange mystical symbols, and maps."² But unlike the Apostle's, Paul's brain can be directly observed by modern science—and we now know what causes his religious experiences: focal seizures in his temporal lobe. Each one coincides with a religious experience and produced in Paul what has come to be known as "temporal lobe personality."

Similar experiences happen to individuals of every religion, yet they teach those individuals vastly different, even contradictory, things. The Apostle Paul's experience, for example, taught him that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, and (arguably) that he was identical to God himself.³ Muhammad's religious experiences, which inspired his writing of the *Qur'ān*, taught him the exact opposite—that Jesus was "no more than a messenger," (Q al-Mā'idah 5:75), that "[i]t is not befitting to (the majesty of) God that He should beget a son," (Q Maryam 19:30–35), and that it would have been blasphemy for Jesus to have claimed to be God (Q al-Mā'idah 5:116–17). Of course, similar disparities among those who have religious experiences abound. A Buddhist's religious experience will likely teach him that there is no God, no persons, and no afterlife, whereas a Christian's will teach him that there is a God and if a person worships him properly, one can enter heaven.

These facts seem to raise serious doubts about the ability of religious experiences to justify religious beliefs, especially for the modern academic theist who is aware of them. Why this is true, however, has not yet been clearly identified. To be sure, many have attempted to argue that these facts *do not* threaten the justificatory power of religious experience; but those say they do have yet to accurately articulate why.⁴ It is the goal of this essay to do so. The author will argue that, at least for those aware of such facts, such as the

² Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 181.

³ Whether Paul actually thought Jesus was God is contentious, but no crucial part of this author's argument hangs on this issue. The author will leave the reader to do their own research.

⁴ For a nice rundown of such arguments, see Mark Webb, "Religious Experience," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified December 13, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience/>.

modern academic theist, the diversity of religious experience and the existence of neurological explanations for religious experience entail that religious experience cannot justify religious belief. First, the author will define and identify the significance of religious experience. Then, the author will argue that the diversity of religious experience establishes its unreliability, rendering its justificatory value moot. Lastly, the author will argue that modern scientific explanations for religious experiences do the same by presenting an alternative and preferable natural explanation of those experiences. The author will do so utilizing two epistemic theories that are prized by theistic philosophers of religion: reliabilism and virtue epistemology.

Defining and Using Religious Experience

Before establishing that religious experience cannot justify religious belief, it is important to define religious experience and the role theists claim it plays in justifying their belief. Religious experiences can be defined as encounters with “the divine” that are ultimately caused by the divine—in which “the divine” is broadly defined to encompass as many religious notions as possible (e.g., The Christian God, the Hindu Brahman, and the Buddhist Void). Some are professed to be visual or auditory experiences not brought about by the ordinary senses; others are simply intellectual realizations (without accompanying experiences). Still others are reactions to worldly stimuli—perhaps an ordinary stimulus (e.g., seeing God in a sunset) or a seemingly miraculous stimulus (e.g., witnessing a faith-healing)—while others are what one might call mystical experiences, which William James said were ineffable (i.e., they cannot be accurately described).⁵ Most are likely passive (one cannot will them to occur) and transitive (they only occur for a short period of time). And while most are also noetic (convey insights into deep truths), others may simply consist in what Jonathan Haidt called “uplift” (something one might feel while singing a hymn at church).⁶ It is difficult to

⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library of New York, 2012).

⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

say more than that but, presumably, that does not matter—because, supposedly, when one has a religious experience, one will know it.⁷

Religious experience has played a significant role in justifying religious belief throughout the history of religion. In addition to the aforementioned role it played in the production of both Christian and Islamic texts, religious experiences *appear* in Scripture as well: Moses, via his burning bush experience, comes to believe that he should lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Mary and Joseph, via angelic announcement, learn of Jesus' miraculous conception. The apostles, in Acts 2, after receiving the Holy Spirit, learn how to speak in different languages. Non-biblical religious experiences include the conversion of C. S. Lewis and the visions of Bernadette Soubirous.⁸ The political and historic significance of religious experience also cannot be forgotten. The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity after a religious experience and tried to influence the entire empire to do likewise. In 2005, George W. Bush told Palestinian ministers that a religious experience inspired him to invade Afghanistan and Iraq.⁹

The role that religious experience plays in justifying religious belief is probably most clearly made by the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. In his 2000 book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, when articulating his "Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model," Plantinga spoke of humans possessing a sixth sense, the *Sensus Divinitatis*, which is attuned to the divine. Through it, the Holy Spirit can instigate beliefs in selected believers through what amounts to a religious experience. As an example, Plantinga has spoken of looking upon a mountain vista and coming to believe that it, and the universe, was designed by God.¹⁰ According to Plantinga, such beliefs are "properly basic." They are justified (even though they are not based on evidence), not because the religious experience provides "evidence" for the belief in question (which it

⁷ The categorization of religious experiences in this paragraph was inspired by Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1979), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198239637.001.0001>.

⁸ For more on Lewis' conversion, see Bruce Edwards, ed., *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, vol. 1, *An Examined Life* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007). For more on Soubirous' conversion, see "St. Bernadette Soubirous," Catholic Online, http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=1757.

⁹ For more on this, see the BBC press release from June 10, 2006 entitled "God Told Me to Invade Iraq, Bush Tells Palestinian Ministers" at http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/06/bush.shtml.

¹⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>.

does not), but because it justifies theistic belief in the same way that seeing a tree can justify one's belief that a tree exists.¹¹ In fact, most defenses of religious experience's ability to justify religious belief rely on some kind of "sense of sight" analogy.¹²

The ability of religious experience to justify religious belief is important because many theists (although not all) admit that evidence for God's existence, and other religious beliefs, can be found nowhere else.¹³ The classic arguments for God's existence, for example, fail. The justification provided by religious experience can also help theists who admit to having no good answer to the evidential problem of evil. Plantinga has even argued that beliefs instigated by religious experience are immune to evidential challenge.¹⁴ But let the reader now consider two arguments that religious experience cannot justify religious belief for the modern academic theist—an inductive argument based on religious diversity and another derived from natural explanations for religious experience.

The Diversity of Religious Experience

The fact that devotees of different religions have religious experiences that lead them to contradictory conclusions seems to threaten the ability of religious experience to provide justification for religious belief. But exactly how this threat should be understood is not straightforward. David Silver articulates it in terms of the individual; the justification that X is true provided by one person's religious experiences can be nullified by the trustworthy testimony of a friend who also had a religious experience but instead came to believe $\sim X$.¹⁵ But there are a few flaws with his account.

¹¹ For Plantinga, evidence must come in propositional form.

¹² See, for example, William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹³ For example, Richard Swinburne, in *The Existence of God*, would argue that religious belief can be justified by evidence and argument.

¹⁴ "Suppose Christian and theistic belief has a good deal of warrant for me by way of faith and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IHS); then the fact that theism is evidentially challenged doesn't give me a defeater and doesn't bring it about that my theistic belief is irrational" (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 478).

¹⁵ David Silver, "Religious Experience and the Facts of Religious Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2001): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004137104820>.

First, it is not clear that even trustworthy testimony can “transfer” the justification provided to someone who has a religious experience to someone else. William James, for example, would argue that the friend’s religious experience can only provide justification for the friend’s religious belief—not the original person’s.¹⁶ So the original person may still have more reason to believe X than \sim X and thus not be in the epistemic bind Silver describes. More importantly, Silver’s individualistic account does not seem to fully appreciate the threat posed by the realization that there are millions of epistemically virtuous, morally upstanding people, who belong to other religions and have religious experiences that teach lessons contrary to one another. Lastly, Silver’s argument does not show that religious experience fails to provide justification for religious belief. It just shows that the evidence initially provided by a religious experience can be counteracted by contrary evidence, leaving one in an epistemically neutral position. The problem that arises from the diversity of religious experience, however, seems to entail something more: that religious experience cannot provide justification for religious belief in the first place.

Theistic philosophers, like Plantinga, are fond of reliabilism—the notion that beliefs are justified if they are produced by “reliable processes” (i.e., processes that are trustworthy, that usually lead to true belief). This is why Plantinga, for example, thinks that his religious experiences justify his religious belief—because they were processes instigated by the Holy Spirit, and any such process must be truth-preserving. But the diversity of religious experience calls into question the reliability of religious experience itself.

To understand why, suppose there are only two religions in the world, with half the world’s population belonging to each, and that the religions are mutually exclusive (only one can be true). Suppose also that religious experiences, which tell the experiencer that their religion is true, are had by adherents of both. Since both religions cannot be true, the religious experiences of at least half the world’s population are leading them astray—producing false belief. Consequently, one must conclude that religious experience is not reliable; half of the time, it results in incorrect conclusions. In such a situation, one could not be justified by a religious experience to believe what it suggests is true; it is just as likely, as not, that it is leading the experiencer astray.

¹⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The problem, of course, is that the conditions in the real world are even less favorable. There are five major world religions, only one of which can be true, and there is at least one major split in each. So, without adjusting for the popularity of certain religions, religious experience produces wrong belief 90% of the time. And even taking popularity into account, and assuming the best case scenario in which the most adhered to religion (Christianity at 31%) is true, and the generous assumption that Christian religious experiences are uniform, religious experience still leads the experiencer astray two-thirds of the time. That hardly makes it a reliable truth-preserving process.¹⁷ So, since the diversity of religious experience entails that religious experience is not a reliable truth-preserving process, and if it is not it cannot justify religious belief, the diversity of religious experience entails that religious experience cannot justify religious belief.

To respond, one cannot merely claim one's religious experience is stronger than someone else's; no one has access to how strong the religious experiences of others are. In fact, the others could simply in turn claim that theirs is stronger—and that leads right back to the same problem.

One might also try to divide religious experience into different kinds, and claim that one kind—one's own kind—*is* reliable. Unfortunately, attempts to do so will either beg the question (one cannot claim to know so via one's religious experience) or undermine the epistemic authority of the kind of religious experience being argued for. For example, if one provides additional evidence for the beliefs produced by a certain kind of religious experience (to show that kind of religious experience reliably leads to true beliefs), then it will be that evidence—not the religious experience—that is doing the justificatory work for the beliefs in question.

Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune, defenders of Silver's thesis, point out that theists fond of Plantinga's A/C model are likely to respond to threats posed to the reliability of religious experiences by observing, "If indeed one's religious experience is reliable, then the belief is still justified."¹⁸ But, although that conditional is true, it does not help one defend religious

¹⁷ Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, "Christians Remain World's Largest Religious Group, but They Are Declining in Europe," Fact Tank: Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>.

¹⁸ Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune, "The Epistemological Limits of Experience-Based Exclusive Religious Beliefs," *Religious Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008): 445–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412508009530>.

experience's ability to justify religious belief. As already shown, there is good reason to think the antecedent of this conditional is false—and if it is false, there is no good reason to think that religious experience can justify religious belief. Indeed, there is good reason to think that it cannot. Because religious experience leads the experiencer astray at least two-thirds of the time, one knows it is not an accurate determiner of religious truth.

The truth of this conditional does entail that, for any given process that justifies a belief, one does not need to know that process is trustworthy (what Plantinga would call “reliable”) in order for it to justify the belief in question. For example, even if one does not know that one's faculty of sight is trustworthy—after all, one might be dreaming—if it is indeed trustworthy, then it does in fact reliably produce true belief and thus can justify one's belief that the world is real (at least according to reliabilism). But if one's faculty of sight is not in fact untrustworthy—suppose it regularly produces hallucinations—then it cannot justify one's belief. What's more, if one has good reason to think that it is untrustworthy (suppose one knows that it produces hallucinations two-thirds of the time), then it certainly cannot justify one's belief! And in such a situation, pointing out “if it were reliably accurate, it would justify belief” does not change this fact, nor does it make one's sight-based beliefs justified.

Perhaps one might continue the point further, suggesting: Even though the diversity of religious experience provides evidence that religious experience is untrustworthy, it still might be that one's religious experience is reliably accurate—maybe one's religious belief really is instigated by the Holy Spirit—and thus, contrary to the claim of this paper, it is at least possible that religious experience can justify religious belief despite the diversity of religious experience. But this seems patently false. To see why, consider another analogy with sight.

If one has good reason to think their faculty of sight is untrustworthy (perhaps one has good reason to believe one is living in a computer simulation), even if it turns out their sight is accurate (one is, in fact, not in a computer simulation), one's doubt about the trustworthiness of one's senses erases any justification that their faculty of sight can provide. In fact, if one has good reason to doubt their sight, one *should not believe* what it tells them, even if it is telling them the truth. In the same way, even if it turns out that one happens to belong to the one true religion and their religious beliefs were bestowed by God via a religious experience (and they are thus reliable), the diversity of religious experience still gives one good reason to doubt the

reliability of the religious experience. Thus, it cannot justify one's religious belief, and one should not believe what it purports to be true.

If one is unaware of the reasons to question the trustworthiness of religious experience (e.g., the diversity of religious experience) and it also happens that one has the kind of religious experience that is accurate (e.g., an experience caused by God)—in that very special circumstance, religious experience would likely justify religious belief. But this will not help the academic theist (or anyone reading this paper) for they cannot claim such ignorance. Thus, the paper's thesis still stands.

The other solution to this problem is to look for overlap to thus defend "the unanimity thesis": Yes, the doctrines supported by religious experience throughout the world's religions are contradictory, but that is because people interpret their religious experiences through the lens of their culture and religious traditions. A Christian will see Jesus; a Hindu, Brahman. But the "core" of all religious experience is the same: it is an encounter with an indescribable reality (often called "The Real") which gives rise to feelings of peace and blessedness that tends to make one less selfish. So, while religious experience may be untrustworthy as a means to true belief about specific religious doctrines, it does reliably produce accurate beliefs regarding these "core" elements. So, religious experience can justify those beliefs.

The idea that there is a common core of religious experience has been defended by Peter Byrne, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, C. D. Broad, and John Hick (just to name a few).¹⁹ Ironically, however, their accounts of this core are largely incompatible. For example, Hick claims that "The Real" is indescribable and incomprehensible by human language and understanding, while Byrne says it can be described and understood by human concepts both negatively and relationally.²⁰ By itself, this fact seems to refute the unanimity thesis. But even setting such disagreements aside, another problem remains. To sensibly claim that such a core is common amongst those who have religious experiences, the phrases used to describe this supposed "core" are so amorphous and ambiguous that they are meaningless. "A distinction-less reality gave me a feeling of peace and made me less selfish." This could mean

¹⁹ For a rundown of their positions, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

²⁰ Peter Byrne, "It Is Not Reasonable to Believe That Only One Religion Is True," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 204.

so many different things that two people could have two completely different experiences, which share no core at all, yet describe them in exactly this way.

But even if one is willing to concede that all religious experiences have a common core and justify such beliefs, this paper's thesis is only slightly weakened. It is still the case that religious experience cannot justify most of the religious beliefs that religious adherents claim they do—beliefs specific to their particular brand of religion. What's more, the fullest version of the author's thesis can still be defended because even those defending the unanimity thesis will not be able to avoid the objection of the next section: the problem of natural explanations for religious experience.

Natural Explanation for Religious Experience

Readers saw, in the introduction, a natural explanation for some religious experiences: focal seizures within the temporal lobe. This has actually helped identify the part of the brain responsible for the production of religious experiences. But epilepsy is not the only way one's temporal lobe can become appropriately stimulated to produce religious experiences. Fasting, illness, meditation, stress, sleeplessness, drugs—even expectation and the right circumstances (e.g., going to church camp) will alter one's temporal lobe and produce a religious experience. Michael Persinger has even invented a transcranial magnetic stimulator that, when applied to one's temporal lobe, reportedly produced religious experiences in his test subjects. His device has come to be known as “The God Helmet.”

To understand the argument of why potential natural explanations for religious experience reduce their justificatory power, let one consider the case of someone who had a religious experience while wearing the God helmet and subsequently came to believe in the existence of “The Real” based on that experience.²¹ Would one say that belief was justified? Of course not. Why? Because in order for it to reliably convey accurate knowledge about The Real, and be genuine, the religious experience must ultimately be caused by The Real. Yet the idea that it was caused by Persinger's God Helmet is a much better explanation (most notably, it is more parsimonious since it does not

²¹ It should be noted that Persinger's experiment has yet to be successfully repeated and the author knows of no one in his experiment who describes their experience as one of “The Real.” The above circumstance is a thought experiment to help clarify the author's argument; and the author will deal with such objections in a note below.

invoke any extra entities or assumptions) and is, thus, the explanation that a rational person should prefer.

Notice that it will not do to suggest the subject coincidentally happened to have a religious experience that was caused by The Real while wearing the God Helmet, and that the God Helmet did not play a causal role in producing the religious experience. This is clearly just an unfalsifiable *ad hoc* excuse to save the religious experience's justificatory power. Notice also that it will not do to suggest that The Real somehow used the God Helmet to produce the religious experience, thus actually being its ultimate cause. Not only is this explanation also *ad hoc*, and not only is its explanatory power low—because it invokes the inexplicable and raises more questions than it answers—but it also multiplies entities unnecessarily by invoking extra outside influences when none are needed.²² One need not invoke The Real to explain the experience; the God Helmet alone will do. In addition, “the Real” explanation also contradicts known physical laws—like the causal closure of the physical, the Conservation of Energy and the Conservation of Momentum—by having a non-physical entity interact with the physical world. As Ted Schick, author of *How To Think About Weird Things*, would undoubtedly point out: The purely natural explanation should be preferred because it is more “adequate.” It has wider “scope” (because it explains more), it is “simpler” (because it requires fewer assumptions and entities), and is more “conservative” (because it does not conflict with established facts).²³ Given one should conclude that The Real was not involved in the production of the experience, one should conclude that the religious experience was not genuine and thus does not justify the belief it produces.²⁴

²² As the saying goes, one cannot successfully explain the unexplained by invoking the inexplicable. For example, “Why would The Real facilitate experience through the God Helmet in this instance when it can do so without it in others?”

²³ See Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn, *How to Think About Weird Things*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2020).

²⁴ Now, to be fair, ability of The God Helmet to actually produce religious experience has been questioned by legitimate scientists. For example, the magnetic fields generated by the helmet do not seem strong enough to penetrate the cranium and influence the relevant neurons; moreover, controlled experiments have not been able to replicate Persinger's results. (For a readable rundown of the criticisms, see the Rational Wiki entry on the topic at https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/God_helmet). This would make the God Helmet hypothesis non-conservative and “unfruitful” (because it does not make accurate predictions; if it worked, Persinger's results would be replicable). But scientists who raise these objections would not suggest “The Real caused it” as the best explanation for the religious experiences that people report to have while wearing the God Helmet. As the reader shall soon see, any other natural

All this makes abundantly clear why the religious experiences of Paul, the Goodwill store assistant manager, cannot justify religious belief. Since one has good reason to think that religious experiences can be produced by temporal lobe seizures, and one knows that Paul has temporal lobe epilepsy, temporal lobe seizures are the best explanation for the religious experiences he has. Invoking God as an explanation of the seizures would, for the same reasons as above, be a less parsimonious, less wide scoping, and less conservative *ad hoc* excuse.

But what about religious experiences in other circumstances when one is not wearing the God Helmet or does not have temporal lobe epilepsy, so one does not have direct awareness of what is going on inside the experiencer's brain at the time of the experience? Should one still favor the natural explanation? Of course. Consider someone who has a religious experience of The Real while fasting, meditating, highly stressed, ill, on drugs, or depriving themselves of sleep. For example, when I attended Southern Nazarene University, a chapel speaker once said that, after not eating for two weeks, he saw Jesus walk through a wall and convey divine truths to him. Sure, one cannot directly observe what their brain was doing at the time of the experience, but one can still ask, "What is the best explanation for the cause of their experience?" Has their physical condition altered their brain and produced the experience, or has The Real reached down from the great beyond to teach them a lesson? The latter multiplies entities beyond necessity, raises more questions than it answers, invokes the inexplicable, and is not conservative. The natural explanation, on the other hand, is quite simple, coheres with how the brain works (and malfunctions), and offers a robust explanation. And it will not do well to suggest that God somehow "used" the altered physical state to produce the experience, for the same reason it will not do to suggest that God used Paul's seizures, or The Real used the God Helmet. Clearly the natural explanation should be preferred.

This is true even for the spontaneous religious experience that one has merely in a conducive environment, such as church camp or a church service. Although it is possible that The Real reached down from outside the physical realm to bestow knowledge of its existence, it is still more likely that one's own expectations and environment overstimulated their temporal lobe or

explanation—from fasting to drugs—would be simpler and more conservative. It is most likely simple expectation bias; subjects, while wearing the God helmet, felt like they were having a religious experience because they were expected to.

otherwise influenced their brain to cause the experience.²⁵ The latter explanation should be preferred, and as such, the religious experience in question cannot justify the belief it produces.

Of course, one cannot prove that the religious explanation is false, but that something cannot be proven false is no reason to think it is true. That would be an appeal to ignorance. In the absence of proof, the best explanation should be preferred, and clearly the natural explanation will always be the best since it will always be simpler, have wider scope, and be more conservative. If a religious experience is produced by purely natural means, it is not a genuine religious experience and cannot justify religious belief. So, in short, since the academic theist can likely never be justified in believing that a religious experience is genuine, religious experience can likely never justify their religious belief.

To reinforce this line of reasoning, consider phlogiston—a substance that was once thought to account for heat by flowing in and out of objects as they became hotter and cooler. Once it was discovered that heat is merely a result of the movement of molecules, it became irrational to believe in phlogiston. One could invoke phlogiston to explain the movement of the molecules, but doing so is less simple, less explanatory, not conservative, and the movement of the molecules can be accounted for without it. If one can explain something with less, one should. Likewise, since one can explain religious experiences with less, one should.

Understanding this argument reveals why the most famous attempts to circumvent the problem of natural explanation for religious experience are insufficient. For example, Robert Ellwood argues that identifying the neural correlate of a religious experience cannot establish it is illusory; if it did, then identifying the parts of the brain responsible for visual sensations would force one to conclude that everything one sees is illusory.²⁶ But the argument that has been presented by this paper does not merely identify a neural correlate of a religious experience. It also identifies the cause of the experience as

²⁵ Of course, it is possible that scientists will find that the temporal lobe is not as essential to the production of religious experiences or that another part of the brain can produce them as well. But this would not affect the truth of the paper's thesis as the natural (brain-based) explanation would still be the preferable one, even if such knowledge were to develop. For a helpful list of different psychological variables that can distort first-hand experiences, see Darren M. Slade, "Properly Investigating Miracle Claims," in *The Case Against Miracles*, ed. John W. Loftus (United Kingdom: Hypatia Press, 2019), 114–47.

²⁶ Robert S. Ellwood, *Mysticism and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999).

something else besides what *must* cause it in order for the experience to be genuine—a seizure, drugs, or the environment. Yes, the realization that visual sensations are correlated with activity in the visual cortex does not give one reason to think that they are illusions; but that is because this realization does not give one reason to think that visual sensations are not ultimately caused by the objects they are reported to be of. If one found out, however, that the most likely ultimate explanation of a visual sensation was something besides the objects one was apparently perceiving—for example, suppose one realized that the best explanation for why one was seeing pink elephants was the work of alcohol on one’s visual cortex—then one should conclude that their visual sensation was illusory. In that case, one would not be justified in believing in the existence of what one’s visual sensations were suggesting was there (in this case, pink elephants). Potential natural explanations for religious experiences provide a better explanation for religious experience that is not ultimately caused by the object that the experience is reportedly of. Since to be genuine (and to justify belief) a religious experience must be caused by the object that the experience is reportedly of, natural (neural) explanations make religious experiences incapable of justifying that belief.

C. D. Broad argues that the fact that altered physical states correlate with religious experiences does not mean they are illusory because:

[If] there is an aspect of the world which remains altogether outside the ken of ordinary persons....It seems very likely that some degree of mental and physical abnormality would be a necessary condition for getting sufficiently loosened from the objects of ordinary sense perception to enter into cognitive contact with this aspect of reality. Therefore, the fact that those persons who claim this peculiar kind of cognition generally exhibit certain mental and physical abnormalities is rather what might be anticipated if their claims were true. One might need to be slightly “cracked” in order to have some peep-holes into the super sensible world.²⁷

There are a few problems with this argument, however. First, as Jeff Jordon argues, it seems quite odd to suggest that there are necessary conditions for

²⁷ C. D. Broad, “Arguments for the Existence of God.” *Journal of Theological Studies* 40, no. 2 (April 1939): 156–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/os-XL.2.156>.

having a religious experience.²⁸ Divine presence is a divine prerogative. But in addition, as a response to the argument presented, Broad's critique is insufficient. While it is possible that temporal lobe seizures open up a cognitive gateway to the great beyond, that explanation is not more adequate than the purely natural one for all the reasons cited above: it is a less simple, non-conservative explanation with narrow scope.

But what if there is not an immediately available natural explanation? What if there was no fasting, meditating, or anything else that one can think of which could alter the brain in the right way? Can one conclude, in such a situation, that one had a genuine religious experience? No. The fact that one cannot think of a natural explanation is not reason to think that there is not one; again, that would be an appeal to ignorance. It is more likely that one's inability to think of a natural explanation is due to one's ignorance than it is to there being no natural explanation. This is akin to reasoning made by medical doctors when they cannot diagnose a disease. Their inability to come up with a natural explanation is not good reason to appeal to divine wrath or demonic possession; it is much more likely that the natural explanation is just hidden because of their lack of knowledge. Besides, something like undiagnosed temporal lobe seizures will always be a better (simpler, wider scoping, more conservative) hypothesis than a supernatural one.

But what if one does not know that religious experiences have potential natural explanations? What if one is ignorant of the developments of neuroscience? Can one be justified in believing their religious experience has a supernatural origin then? Perhaps, but this is not going to help the modern academic theist justify their religious belief via religious experience. First, the author doubts many actually are ignorant of such things. Second, even if they are, this does not allow them to justify their religious belief in this way. Why? The answer lies in an epistemic theory often defended by theists: virtue epistemology. To see why, return once again to the disease analogy.

Suppose that an academic theist has somehow remained ignorant of the germ theory of disease. He then contracts the flu but does not understand why, and does not even know that there are natural explanations for such illnesses. Can he justifiably believe that the infection is caused by a demon? No, for even though he does not know there are natural explanations, he should. By remaining ignorant of the germ theory of disease, he has neglected

²⁸ Jeff Jordon, "Religious Experience and Naturalistic Explanations," *Sophia* 33, no. 1 (1994): 60–73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02772368>.

his epistemic duty. He is epistemically blameworthy and, as a result, his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

In the same way, an academic theist who has remained ignorant of the natural explanations for religious experiences cannot hide behind this ignorance. He should be aware of such things; at the least, it is his duty to learn about things directly relevant to his theistic belief—and this is obviously one of them. He has neglected his epistemic duty. He is thus epistemically blameworthy, and his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

Interestingly, however, religious experience might have been able to justify religious belief in earlier times. If natural explanations are not completely available (e.g., undiscovered), one cannot be expected to know about them and, thus, be derelict in one's epistemic duty. The Apostle Paul, for example, could have been justified in thinking that disease was caused by demons and that his religious experience on the road to Damascus was one of supernatural origin. But if he were alive today, he could not—for he *should* know the germ theory of disease and that his conversion experience mirrors exactly the symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy.

So perhaps the Apostle Paul could have been justified, by his religious experience, in believing that Jesus was the Messiah. He did not know about the better natural explanations for his experience, nor could he have been expected to. But an academic theist cannot be so justified, either by their own religious experience (they should be aware of the better natural explanations) or by relying on Paul's (for one knows it is much more likely that Paul was a temporal lobe epileptic). And the same holds for all religious experiences; they cannot, for the modern academic theist, justify religious belief.

Conclusion

Ramachandran, in his chapter about Paul the Goodwill store assistant manager, essentially dodges the obvious questions regarding the legitimacy of Paul's religious experience: "But why do patients like Paul have religious experiences?...One [possibility] is that God really does visit these people. If that is true, so be it. Who are we to question God's infinite wisdom? Unfortunately, this can be neither proved nor ruled out on empirical grounds."²⁹ While he is right that it can neither be proved nor disproved that God visits Paul (because nothing in science can be proved or disproved), it

²⁹ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 182.

would be an appeal to ignorance to suggest this is a reason to accept the hypothesis that God does. It also does not mean that evidence and scientific reasoning cannot be brought to bear on the question, nor does it mean that there is not good reason to reject this possibility. And clearly, since the neurological explanations for religious experience are more adequate, they should be preferred. To not accept them is unscientific and irrational, just as it would be to think that demons cause disease. As seen, one could lump God on as an additional causal mechanism, where God is the cause of the neurological state, but this is unnecessary. Such states can be, and are, accounted for completely by natural mechanisms—the effects of God helmets, seizures, drugs, fasting, illness, stress, and even the environment—on one's brain. Lumping God onto the explanation makes it less simple, raises more questions than it answers, invokes the inexplicable, and conflicts with existing knowledge. Therefore, it should be avoided.

Ramachandran also wrote that natural explanations for religious experience have no bearing on whether or not God exists: “My goal as a scientist ... is to discover how and why religious sentiments originate in the brain, but this has no bearing one way or the other on whether God exists or not.”³⁰ However, again, while it is true that neurological explanations for religious experience do not *disprove* God's existence, it is clearly false that they have no bearing on it since natural explanations for religious experiences negate their ability to provide evidence for God's existence. If one relies on religious experience to provide justification for one's belief in God, as many theists do, clearly discovering natural explanations for religious experiences has great bearing on one's justification for belief in God. In addition, if it can be effectively argued that belief in God (or religious belief in general) originally arose because of religious experience, but religious experience has a purely naturalistic cause, then significant doubt arises about God's existence.

One might reply that such reasoning commits the genetic fallacy, but such a reply misunderstands that fallacy. The genetic fallacy entails that one cannot *dismiss evidence* for a theory by identifying the origin of that theory. For example, one cannot dismiss the hypothesis that the structure of Benzene is circular (“ring shaped”) based on the fact that the idea came to Kekule in a dream because the subsequent evidence that he was right is insurmountable. But the genetic fallacy does not mean that the origin story of a thing is irrelevant to whether or not that thing exists. One could, for example, provide

³⁰ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 185.

good reason for not believing in El Chupacabra by pointing out that the myth started when Madelyne Tolentino confabulated a story after watching the movie “Species” in 1995.³¹ Identifying the belief’s origin cannot be used to dismiss the subsequent “evidence” for El Chupacabra (there are other ways of doing that); but the fact that belief in El Chupacabra does not actually originate from an genuine sighting of a blood-sucking, goat-killing crypto-creature—but instead from a confabulated story—is good reason to think that there is no such thing. Likewise, without good evidence for God’s existence—something that many who rely on religious experience admit—the fact that belief in God does not originate in God, but instead in naturally caused religious experiences, would be good reason to think that there is no God.

Swinburne has defended the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief with the “principle of credulity”: “(in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present (and has some characteristic), then probably *x* is present (and has that characteristic).”³² In other words, unless there is some reason to think otherwise, if a person has an experience which seems to be of *x*, then it is rational to believe that *x* exists. This paper has not argued that this principle is false. It has shown why (when *x* = God), there are indeed “special considerations.” The diversity of religious experience and the existence of natural explanations for religious experience entail that, when it comes whether religious experiences are genuine, there is always some reason to think otherwise.

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³¹ Ironically, Madelyne came to believe that she actually saw something, but Radford clearly shows that her memory of the experience was obviously a confabulation based on her experience of watching the movie (Benjamin Radford, *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore* [Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011], 183–4). The description she gave, months after the “sighting,” matched directly with the “species” alien character in the film.

³² Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 303.

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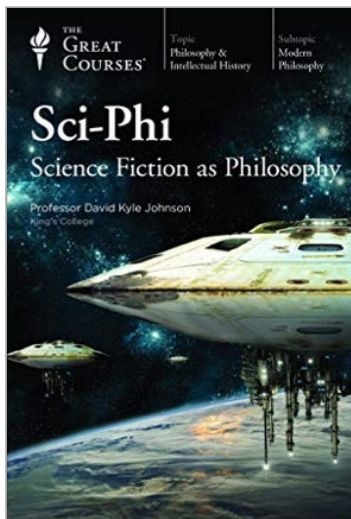
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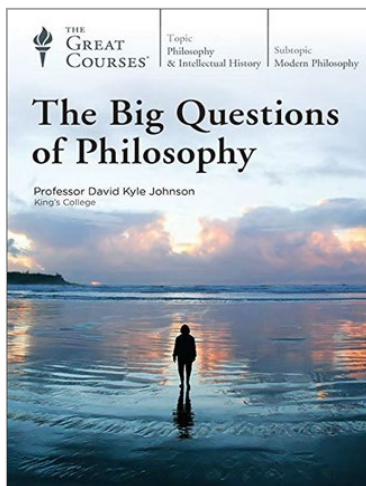
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